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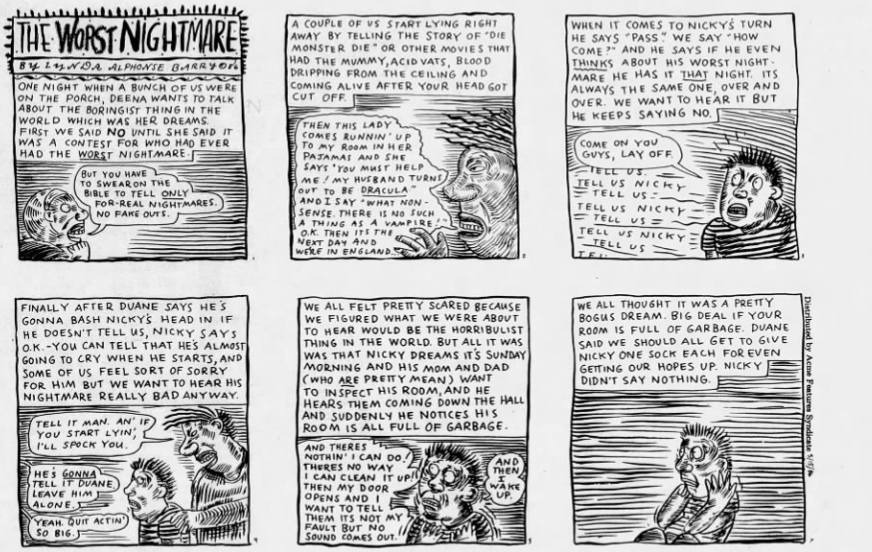
Modern Life Stripped

by Richard Meltzer



Joining ship with Matt Groening is Lynda Barry, possibly the great spinner of the contempo-U.S., um, short story. There's this recent strip of hers you haven't seen — it never ran in L.A. — in which a sensitive but essentially standard-issue grade-school white girl hooks up with a speech-impaired, extremely four-eyed black boy named Calvin. She finds his stutter fascinating, annoys her mom by trying to copy it, mopes around listening to Sam Cooke while visualizing Calvin in pajamas. Finally her friends convince her the boy's a "spaz-mo," and in the last frame she tells him, "You are a cruddy fish-eyes, C-C-C-Calvin," to which he responds like she really wasn't "saying anything big." Great cruelty, great economy of expression. (Eat yer hearts out, Raymond Carver, Laurie Colwin.)

Plus she's got these visuals that at all times enhance — and amplify — text at least as well as art direction did ditto for Brazil. *Or* Raging Bull. *From ultra-mundane to hyper-grotesque, she's always toying with options, searching, groping for new techniques and strategies to adequately render the cartoon face of trans-human basic you-name-it. Yes, there is something existentially "real" (and missionlike) about her mission. mission.*

Like her old buddy Matt, Barry, 30, is an alumna of The Evergreen. ("Be sure to include the 'The' — it's officially part of the name.") She lives in Seattle, where she is currently preparing a show of portraits of Cajun accordion players and whatnot, and will in no likelihood ever move to L.A. Her "Modern Romance," a full-color strip first commissioned by Esquire *in '83, is easily the most vital monthly feature that mag has published in decades. Three books,* Girls + Boys, Big Ideas *and* Naked Ladies Naked Ladies Naked Ladies, *are in their fifth, fourth and first printings, respectively. Harper & Row will be releasing her biggest and fattest yet,* Everything in the World, *in October.*

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